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BY BRIAN MOTTAZ

SPOKANE, WASH. (UPI) -- RICHARD NIXON NEVER THOUGHT ANYONE WOULD FIND OUT ABOUT THE INFAMOUS WATERGATE TAPES, AND JOHN KENNEDY WAS PROBABLY NOT AWARE OF GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTS TO ASSASSINATE FIDEL CASTRO, MEN WHO SERVED THE TWO PRESIDENTS AS PRESS SECRETARIES ASSERT.

IN ADDITION, LYNDON JOHNSON GENERALLY ACCEPTED THE FINDINGS OF THE WARREN COMMISSION, AND GERALD FORD WAS ONLY CONCERNED ABOUT THE WELFARE OF THE NATION IN PARDONING NIXON.

THESE WERE AMONG CONCLUSIONS DRAWN DURING A WEEKEND FORUM OF FORMER PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARIES AT GONZAGA UNIVERSITY. AMONG THOSE PARTICIPATING WERE PIERRE SALINGER, GEORGE REEDY, RON ZIEGLER AND RON NESSEN, WHO SERVED AS PRESS AIDES IN THE KENNEDY, JOHNSON, NIXON AND FORD ADMINISTRATIONS, RESPECTIVELY.

ZIEGLER, WHO ADMITTED HE HAD BEEN "MISLED" BY NIXON BUT STILL CONSIDERED THE FORMER PRESIDENT TO BE A FRIEND, SAID HE THOUGHT THERE WERE TWO REASONS WHY NIXON NEVER DESTROYED THE WATERGATE TAPES, WHICH WERE LATER INSTRUMENTAL IN HIS DOWNFALL AS PRESIDENT.

"FIRST, I THOUGHT PRESIDENT NIXON FELT THEY (THE TAPES) WOULD NOT BE PENETRATED, THAT THEY COULD NOT BE GOTTEN TO," ZIEGLER TOLD ABOUT 2,000 PERSONS ATTENDING THE SATURDAY NIGHT FORUM.

ZIEGLER SAID ONCE THE EXISTENCE OF THE TAPES WAS DISCOVERED, NIXON WAS UNSURE OF HOW TO DISPOSE OF THEM.

"IF THE TAPES ARE GOING TO BE DESTROYED, HOW ARE THEY GOING TO DO IT? WHO IS GOING TO DO IT?" ZIEGLER SAID.

AT ANOTHER POINT IN THE FORUM, SALINGER WAS PUT ON THE DEFENSIVE BY NEW YORK TIMES REPORTER SEYMOUR HERSH, A MEMBER OF THE PANEL SELECTED TO QUESTION THE FOUR PRESS SECRETARIES WHO WAS CRITICAL OF THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION IN REGARD TO CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY ABUSES.

"I DON'T THINK KENNEDY WAS EVER AWARE THAT THE MAFIA WAS COMMISSIONED TO PULL OFF AN ASSASSINATION PLOT TO KILL CASTRO," SALINGER SAID. "THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT LINKS PRESIDENT KENNEDY OR ANYONE AROUND HIM TO THE ATTEMPTS TO KILL CASTRO."

IN RESPONSE TO A QUESTION ABOUT THE FINDINGS OF THE WARREN COMMISSION, SALINGER SAID HE HAD SEEN NOTHING TO CONVINCE HIM THAT OTHER THAN A LONE ASSASSIN WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR KILLING KENNEDY, AN OPINION APPARENTLY SHARED BY FORMER PRESIDENT JOHNSON.

"THE LAST TIME I TALKED TO JOHNSON, HE ACCEPTED THE WARREN COMMISSION REPORT ON FACE VALUE," SAID REEDY, WHO NOTED THAT HE HAD HEARD SINCE THEN FROM OTHERS THAT JOHNSON HAD SOME DOUBTS ABOUT THE COMMISSION ITSELF.

ON THE QUESTION OF FORD'S PARDON OF NIXON, NESSEN SAID HE BELIEVED FORD ALWAYS THOUGHT THE PARDON WAS IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE NATION, REGARDLESS OF THE REPERCUSSIONS.

"PRESIDENT FORD HAS SAID HE BELIEVED THE PARDON DAMAGED HIS CHANGES IN THE ELECTION AND I AGREE," NESSEN SAID.

ZIEGLER, WHO AGREED WITH NESSEN ON THE QUESTION OF THE PARDON, TOLD THE AUDIENCE THERE WERE TIMES WHEN HE GAVE WRONG INFORMATION TO THE PRESS, BUT CONTENDED HE DIDN'T INTENTIONALLY LIE.

"WHEN I LOOK BACK ON IT, I DIDN'T FIND OUT ENOUGH AND I DIDN'T PROBE AS WELL AS I SHOULD HAVE," ZIEGLER SAID. "THE REST IS HISTORY."

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